



CHILD ACTOR ETHICS:  
CHILDREN IN PLAYS WITH ADULT THEMES

by  
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Many plays with adult themes involve a child character in order to help present controversial issues. Little is written, however, concerning the ethics surrounding the involvement of children in adult-themed plays, and there is no formal code or guide for theatre companies to follow when choosing to work with a young actor on one of these complicated scripts. There is little dispute that children have a strong effect on an audience when they appear onstage, but the argument as to how a child actor might be adversely affected by their participation has not been fully explored.

The focus of this study is on four different case studies of children involved in regional theatre productions of plays with different adult

themes, such as war, death, sex, and violence. From these observations, I will propose an effective guide for theatre companies to use when involving a child actor in an adult-themed play.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION:  
REPRESENTING CHILDHOOD ON STAGE

In the summer of 2005, Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company produced Bruce Norris' *The Pain and the Itch*. A cautionary blurb on Steppenwolf's website warned that the play contained "adult language and content." Two child actors shared the part of Kayla in the production, a character of four years old who wanders about the stage amongst her troubled family. In the course of the play, Kayla witnesses several intense, obscenity-laced screaming matches between her fictional parents. In one scene Norris indicates in his stage directions, "*Kayla has entered, searching for Kalina. She has one hand inside her pull-up*" (17). Within the pre-established context of the play, her gesture signifies to the audience that her genitals are inflamed and itchy because she has received a sexually transmitted disease. An uproar ensued when patrons saw child actors Lillian Almaguer and Hailey Gould play the role of Kayla. A flood of articles filled the *Chicago Times* and *Chicago Sun* questioning the integrity of Steppenwolf's decision to involve children in kindergarten and first grade in such an "adult play."

Steppenwolf's production of *The Pain and the Itch* raised ethical questions about professional theatres' use of child actors (of any age) in plays with so-called adult themes for both the community that Steppenwolf serves as well as the greater theatre community. Plays such as *The Pain and the Itch* force theatre professionals to consider under what circumstances it is suitable to expose children to more adult topics. This decision, however, does not only rest with "theatre professionals" like the casting team at Steppenwolf: parents, teachers, and communities undoubtedly have differing ideas of both how to protect children and how to educate them.

The use of the child body on stage is both practically and ethically problematic. In this study, I explore those issues present when including a child actor in a production such as who is responsible for the child's emotional safety, differing age abilities, and the degree of adult content. Four case studies aid my discussion of who might take responsibility for the child involved. I also draw conclusions on how and when children are affected by adult material by looking at the psychological debate concerning the age at which children are able to discern reality from representation. My central question here is: at what age are children able to healthily enter into a discussion about character intentions and whether what occurs on stage is representing real life? Finally, the degree of adult content varies based not only on the age of the child viewing it

but also based on the amount of violence and the type presented. Physical harm is perceived differently than verbal abuse, which also differs entirely from a more social violence like war. Sexual content must also be taken into consideration, as a young child might not understand at all while an older, teenage child is capable of processing the information. A child between eight and twelve, however, might be more susceptible to misinterpreting adult sexuality and abuse than other age groups. Age, supervision, and content all affect one another and should undoubtedly all be taken into consideration.

Children gain valuable experience creating art that discusses the world they live in. Arizona State University Theatre For Youth MFA professor Roger Bedard informs my thoughts concerning how youth perceive theatrical events. Bedard contends in his article “A Layperson’s Guide to the Art in Arts Education” that the interaction children have with theatre and art is not so different from an adult actor exploring certain dramatic themes and questions. Bedard concludes that he, like any child, continues to experience “Ah-Hah” moments (7). I argue that child actors involved in productions intended for adults should be assured a safe and beneficial experience that assists them in being able to process the topics presented in the theatrical production in which they are participating. In order to do this I pull from key concepts in child

psychology drawing back to Piaget in order to understand when children can discern representation from reality.

An article in *American Theatre* magazine by John Istel originally fueled my interest in this topic. In the article Istel questions modern playwrights' inclusion of children in plays intended for an adult audience using Bruce Norris's play *The Pain and the Itch* as one of his examples. As Istel notes in the article, the theatre does not call for a rating system. Attending a play is not an individual activity akin to watching television or playing a video game. Theatre is a communal activity and children do not attend alone but accompanied by a parent, teacher, or guardian. "Parents – and sometimes teachers – take kids to the theatre, and sit next to them, ready to explain complicated points or laugh awkwardly at parts that might be too mature" (Istel 120). Although most parents would not take their children to see plays such as *Pillowman* or *The Pain and the Itch* it is still possible to create some sort of dialogue between parent and child about what occurs onstage. Having the parent nearby if the material does become inappropriate or harmful is essential.

I choose to detail the process of four different theatre companies in order to detail which methods have been employed by theatre companies in regards to the usage of child actors in adult-themed plays. By examining the process of these companies and delineating what did or did not work, I will propose what I then believe to be the most effective

solutions to including one or more children in an adult cast. Of these four productions I draw on the only one that I am not connected to in any way (other than being a part of the greater theatre community) is *The Pain and the Itch*. I chose to include this particular case study not only because of the interesting debate that arose because of it but also due to the fact that the Steppenwolf Theatre Company is one of the premier regional theatre companies in the nation and therefore representative of regional equity theatres.

### **Rating Systems**

In order to create a system to evaluate the theatre practices in regards to the involvement of children I will consider rating systems used in the entertainment industry. Rating systems have been established for several mediums to recommend what material is appropriate for children to see. For films, the Motion Picture Association of America establishes these recommendations, in television the TV Parental Guidelines officiate. Online those responsible for the parental guidelines are the members of the Internet Content Rating Association. Rating systems used in television, film, and on the internet monitor the viewer's age in regards to particular content. These rating systems are concerned only with what the child is watching or the content that is being watched. Not taken into consideration, are those instances such as when a child actor

is used on stage in which the child is not only watching the content but participating in it.

As far as ratings posted to the content being watched, some theatres' marketing teams, especially those at a children's theatre, often add a sentence denoting something like "suitable for ages eight and up" or whatever the production team, director, and producer have deemed the appropriate age. The TV rating system provides a guideline for parents to control the content that their children are exposed to at home in front of the television. It is based on the amount of suggestive dialogue, sexual situations, coarse or crude language, violence, and fantasy violence (in the case of children's programming). TV-Y7 or TV "Directed to Older Children" lists this description:

This program is designed for children age 7 and above. It may be more appropriate for children who have acquired the developmental skills needed to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements in this program may include mild fantasy violence or comedic violence, or may frighten children under the age of 7. Therefore, parents may wish to consider the suitability of this program for their very young children (TV Parental Guidelines).

Those who monitor the content of television programs have come to the agreement that children are not able to differentiate fantasy from reality until the age of seven. This age might have roots in science as I will detail in the next chapter the similar age that developmental psychologists deem up to that maturity level.

I agree that it is effective and valuable to have a rating system in place so that parents need not always pre-view material for content. However, I am not fully aligned with the premise that a strict and specific age should be attached to the ability to separate reality from representation. Nothing in the text of the rating listed above suggests that parents might be able to make the material valuable by guiding their child through the viewing of it (that is, actively participating in the viewing experience with their child). Ratings such as TV-Y7 assume that only children who are seven years old or older have the capacity to interpret the content by themselves. The rating does not assume that any five year old could possibly interpret themes and distinguish reality. By contrast, the mother of a child who acted in Ellen McLaughlin's version of *Trojan Women* at the University of Oregon says, "I have met many a precocious seven or eight-year-old who has been more than capable of understanding and having opinions about concepts like war, divorce, and death" (Anonymous parent). Who is to say that the same cannot be said for certain five or six year olds? I contend the subjectivity of a child's abilities and diversity of experiences at different ages precludes posting an absolute rating system. Instead, theatre companies should substitute a system of general recommendations and information about what kind of material is included. A consistent rating system does not yet exist for theatre. It is up to theatre companies, parents, and educators to map



out recommendations about what children of varying ages see and participate in on the stage.

Many theatre companies (and especially children's theatres) add age recommendations onto plays with more complicated themes. For their production of *The Pain and the Itch* Steppenwolf added a short blurb to their website stating, "Contains adult language and content." Because the company knows that children are not an intended audience for the play, boundaries are set for children in the audience. What then, are the precautions and boundaries that should be set for those children representing these adult themes on stage? Should children ever work in adult-themed plays? Should playwrights be writing them in roles?

*The Pain and the Itch* is not an isolated example of a play with adult themes that includes child actors. John Istel notes an increase in the presence of children on stage in adult plays in recent years. This rise in the use of actual children on stage causes Istel to ask the question,

Is the increased stage presence and focus on actual child characters and their extreme physical abuse just sensationalism? Is it a way to get the jaded attention of theatergoers...? Or are these playwrights zeroing in on the phenomenon of how American kids seem to have an incredibly shrinking childhood?" (120).

All adults have experienced childhood, making it relatable for everyone. Childhood naïveté is constantly being threatened by atrocities occurring in the world. I argue in this study that – in the interests of young actors and the integrity of the theatre experience – guidelines should be put into

place for any producing agency using a young person in a theatre production. These guidelines should assure the child an experience that is both mutually beneficial and positive without being rigid or prohibitive.

Children are affected by the actions of adult society. They *are* the casualties, the victims, the literally and metaphorically crucified (as in *The Pillowman*). Children placed on stage in an adult context become a phenomenological spectacle. In order to employ the child on stage to point out some of the harsh realities occurring in society, theatre artists must responsibly consider the possible effects. "Theatre as a 'place of seeing' is uniquely able to fulfill the powerful craving for spectacle" Anne Bogart remarks. "With a consciousness of its power and a responsibility for its magnetic qualities, a vigilant use of spectacle can add a poetic dimension to the theatre event" (Bogart 81). The poetic spectacle that Bogart refers to is that of human bodies in space. Children, who are often placed on stage because of the spectacle their body in relation to that of an adult creates, demand this same responsibility from the artist.

Moreover, "Coming of Age" is a topic playwrights often interrogate. This interrogation implies creating those very situations where the loss of childhood innocence is explored. I use the word innocence to imply that the child has not yet been exposed to sex, violence, or social injustices. Asking how and when children enter into maturity means that the very

situations that might force children to lose that innocence are explored. In presenting a loss of naiveté not only the characters but also the child actor portraying that character might be unwittingly forced to lose it as well. The age of majority, when one acquires all the rights and responsibilities of an adult is eighteen years in the United States.

Parental consent and parental involvement in the process is therefore a legal imperative to children acting on the stage. A responsibility towards protecting child actors in theatre rests with both those adults involved in the production process and also on the parent of the child. Increased positive parental involvement in a production strongly contributes to the healthy success of a child actor.

### **What is Childhood?**

According to a recent study by Philippe Aries, the concept of childhood did was not coined until sometime near the nineteenth century. "In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist . . . Once he had passed the age of five or seven, the child was immediately absorbed into the world of adults" (128, 301). The social construction of childhood, Aries believes, did not come about until the development of schools to differentiate children from adolescents and adolescents from adults. The middle class during the nineteenth century also contributed to the advent of childhood. A better economic condition provided the

luxury for families to become more conscious of their children. Stable economics also gave families more of a desire to keep their children alive, healthy, and protected. Wealthy parents in the Victorian era who had the luxury of being able to keep their children out of the industrial workplaces began to treat them as precious prizes to be kept beautiful and untouched by the realities of life for as long as possible.

Today, the representation of children and childhood on stage still strikes a hot debate. “Childhood is not universal,” writes Stephani Woodson in her article *Mapping the Cultural Geography of Childhood*. “Childhood exists as a type of performance space—a cultural geography—in which identities are performed on, in, and through child bodies” (31). On stage, the identity of the child may be portrayed in a number of different ways in various characters and yet, “In almost all performances, we see the ‘real’ person and also that which the actor is representing or pretending. The actor is visible within the character” (Kirby 47). The presence of the real child actor showing through the character on stage is what brings the audience out of the story, fearing for the safety of the actual child.

### **Regulating Children in the Theatre**

The regulation of children performing in the theatre is not a new idea just as violence, war, sex, drugs, and social and health issues are

not new theatre topics. A child role can be found in the script of Euripides' violent tragedy *Trojan Women* as well as in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Electra*, *Medea*, and more. Shakespeare included young children in plays such as in *Richard III* and in *Macbeth*. In the twenty-first century, several plays can be held up as examples of children represented in plays with adult themes. The Tony award-winning musical hit, *Les Miserables*, includes several children in an adult-themed situation as the characters are surrounded by war, death, and abuse.

The brutal regulation of children on stage in America came to a head in the early 1900s. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, called the Gerry Society after founder Elbridge Gerry, successfully lobbied for Congress to pass the child labor laws that would prevent children from performing in Broadway theatres. The Gerry Society hoped that banning children on stage would also cut down on the number of children present in the Broadway theatre audiences. The results of such laws were that "police could not only close plays, but they could take child actors into their custody, as they did in 1905 when two fifteen-year-old girls on the stage were found to have learned to smoke and drink there" (Salazar 9). Censoring children from participating in a play entirely is not as educationally productive as coming up with a creative solution for how best to involve the child in the production.

Elbridge Gerry, along with the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) fought against children performing in plays providing “anecdotal evidence illustrating how [child actors] were shamelessly exploited by parents, morally degraded by bad associations, physically exhausted by long hours, and educationally compromised by the demands of their work” (McArthur 67). Gerry felt that the children of the theatre were being morally corrupted at a young age. McArthur also states in his *Theatre Survey* article that “Gerry’s visceral objections to child actors seem to have been shaped more by saloons and music halls, where children sang and danced among plumes of smoke, than by the legitimate stage” (67). The campaign to bar children from performing on professional stages began in the state of New York with the passage of An Act to Prevent and Punish Wrongs to Children in 1876 and continued with the passing of the Gerry Laws, which specifically barred children from performing on professional New York stages.

Before the nineteenth century in Europe and in America, children often apprenticed with their parents or other workers in a specific vocation in order to best learn the trade. At the end of the nineteenth century, the popular belief became that a wide “intellectual development was necessary in order to equip children for the modern age” (Vey 126). Apprenticeship in the theatre was challenged by Modernists, who doubted its effectiveness to guarantee a strong adult career as an actor

without the appropriate literacy skills and world knowledge. Elbridge Gerry noted that the proper education of child actors was being neglected. He believed that all children should receive a formal education, that the best education was one in which a child attended school regularly, and that child actors were not able to attend school regularly. Gerry's solution to keep children both safe and well educated was to make a concerted effort to censor their representation on the theatrical stage. His misguided efforts were not completely atrocious as his intentions to safeguard the child were principled and respectable. Gerry's choice, however, to protect children by banning them from the stage entirely commands criticism.

A set of recommendations is a valuable tool, not by which to censor plays, but to guide theatre companies and parents in how best to involve a child actor in a play. All theatre organizations should have a policy in place detailing protocol for when a child actor is involved in a performance geared for adults. Steppenwolf serves as a strong example of a theatre company that could have set themselves up for a more positive reaction to their play if had a policy been firmly in place for them to reference. In the case of putting children into plays with adult themes, I assert that the only ethical choice is involving the child and parents, with the child's education and healthy development as an artist and person as the primary concern. With an effective pedagogy present, the child

should realistically draw positive lessons out of any acting situation (even if they are merely learning how *not* to act).



## CHAPTER II

### DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY AND RESPONSIBILITY

### FOR THE CHILD ACTOR

Play and new experience are fundamental to learning in children according to one of the founders of Developmental Psychology, Jean Piaget. Piaget maintains that through experience and experimentation in different fictional activities children gain knowledge about how to perform in actual situations. In this chapter, I will explore the benefits of a safe theatre experience for child actors as well as analyze the psychological discussion of a child's ability to discern fact from fiction.

Children actively work to make sense of the world around them and adapt to their environment. Arizona State University Theatre for Youth professor Stephani Woodson comments in her article for the *Arts Education Policy Review*, "All of the teachers I interviewed for this article speak of the theatre as a prosocial force, with the ability to reach young people in a way that traditional education cannot" (26). If used correctly and under the guidance of an adult, theatre can become an invaluable learning tool. "Experience is the stimulus for development in Piaget's theory but what develops is not simply a copy of what is experienced but

a set of cognitive structures with which to interpret experiences” (McShane 123). Involving children in the theatrical production process potentially expands their cognitive ability. Yet this statement fails to acknowledge both the psychological ramifications of placing a child in a dangerous new experience as well as the adults’ responsibility and power over how a child might receive certain experiences.

### **Parental Obligation**

Nancy Carson, one of New York City’s top-rated children’s agents has launched the careers of stars such as pop music idol Britney Spears. She advises the parents of child actors that “as the child’s legal guardian, it is up to you to look after his physical and emotional welfare” (185). It is the child’s parent or legal guardian who is responsible for deciding what is and is not appropriate for their child to experience and to set and guard limits for them. Boundaries can always be pushed but having established them will help everyone involved to know how best to keep the child safe.

During the early stages of childhood, the parent is a partner for play. Children rely on adults to both introduce them to life experiences and situations and also to aid them in interpreting these experiences.

Vygotsky stressed that interpersonal situations are important for guiding children in their development of the skills and behaviors considered important in their culture . . . Adults guide children in

carrying out activities that are beyond the children's individual skills, and this joint problem solving provides children with information appropriate to stretch their skills (Morelli and Rogoff 315).

This naïveté and dependence on adults is double-sided. Adults are able to guide children in a positive manner through what might otherwise be difficult, psychologically damaging, or confusing experiences. Piaget addresses the child's construction of reality asserting that children are apt to satisfy their own personal desires. He asserts that children will judge from their own personal point of view rather than from another person's perspective and yet, "during the earliest stages of individual thought that child's astonishing docility with respect to the suggestions and statements of another person" (363). A young child's eagerness to be molded by others suggests that adults are able to indoctrinate children with the appropriate morals.

As children are not able to provide legal or professional representation for themselves, it is up to adults to fairly represent the child. Placing children into a production without the child's agreement and knowledge of the material denotes that the children are merely being used on stage for effect but that there is not a benefit on the child's end. Involving a child in a positive way rather than using them for their naïve services is the ethical option. Children rely on adults as their guardians, for their education, and, in the theatre work environment, and as

professionals to keep them physically and emotionally safe. It is adults that determine how children are represented and supported. In addition to learning from experiments and from their peer group, children depend heavily upon the interactions they receive from adults to dictate what is and is not appropriate behavior. Children crave structure and are in the process of discovering it. Children need adults to help them define and set up this structure: a schema for dealing with their experience and feelings and relating them effectively to others.

### **Theatre/Artist Obligation**

Exposing children to adult themes in a theatrical manner at a point when it is clear that they are able to separate themselves from the characters in the play is healthier than allowing a child to come face-to-face with an adult scenario before they are prepared to confront it on their own. The theatre process brings together multiple age groups: productions provide a unique opportunity for adults to engage and educate their underage colleagues. Using a child actor for shock value can only be effective if an effective pedagogy is present and the child is aware of what the actions they are experiencing might mean. In order to engage in a pedagogy that is mutually beneficial, theatres and directors need a plan to involve child actors starting at the beginning of the production process with their health and growth in mind.

A *Chicago Tribune* review from September 2006 of Martin

McDonagh's *Pillowman* states "Artists are morally obliged to reflect the world they perceive" (Jones 1). Theatre critic Chris Jones implies here that a playwright should include strong adult themes and child characters in order to honestly comment on the state of society if that is what they perceive the world to contain. Artists have a moral responsibility to portray the cruelties of life in a responsible way. Casting to "reflect" the reality of the world or a character does not dictate that the character must be of the actual age indicated in the script. An older child or adult may theatrically portray what it is like to be a child as the other characters on stage theatrically portray how their characters would relate to that child. However, to contrast this sense of theatricalism or imperfect representation with the need for verisimilitude, Aristotle argues in his *Poetics* that humans long to see imitation and accurate representation including difficult subjects.

The instinct for imitation is implanted in human being from childhood . . . We learn our earliest lessons through imitation and take pleasure in all things imitated. Even things which are repugnant to us in real life, such as vermin or corpses, give us pleasure when reproduced with minute fidelity (14 McLeish).

All adults have experienced childhood. It is a universal touchpoint for the audience. Seeing the live bodies of children portraying difficult situations on stage causes intrigue, fear, and interest in an audience. The question

artists need to ask is whether or not these effects are worth involving a child.

The inclusion of children on stage in complicated situations can contribute to a sort of “fear factor” or heightened catharsis: the jaded audience is engaged in a new way. Human infatuation with fear and scariness surfaces in the many films and art which include themes of pain and fear. When someone sees that there is a car wreck, looking over at the wreckage seems unavoidable and very intriguing. In the same way, the shock value of seeing a child on stage in the middle of grown-up situations can be very attractive to an adult audience:

Scariness has gained ground as a pleasure: it is perhaps a modern affect, a symptom of the late twentieth century, of the mixed feelings we suffer when new beginnings and new endings collide at the end of the millennium . . . That children’s word ‘scary’ covers responses ranging from pure terror to sheer delight, and the condition of being scared is becoming increasingly sought after not only as a source of pleasure but as a means of strengthening the sense of being alive, of having a command over self (Warner 5-6).

Responsibility rests with theatre-makers to avoid placing any child onstage only to achieve shock or fear. If a playwright is reflecting the world they perceive as Jones stated, and the production team decides to produce the play with realistic casting, then child actors must be included. Yet, it is also the responsibility of the artist to maintain that their art is indeed a representation of reality and is not having a negative

effect on an actual child's life. "Holding the mirror up to nature" is only useful if the well-being of real people is taken into consideration.

The inclusion of children may provide an accurate reflection of the world and may inspire the audience to analyze their actions and the effects that they are having on the rest of society. On the other hand, some productions use the child on stage as a token shock element: manipulating the audience into an unearned, strong emotional response. This decision deserves pause.

### **Development**

Children learn to play at a very young age. Fantasy play or pretending to be different characters is present in all preschoolers. "From the age of 3 onwards, pretend play involves quite sophisticated social role-playing skills with peers" (Pellegrini and Smith 280). They see when someone plays a character and can choose to personify a character themselves. The wide belief in developmental psychology is that from ages three to five children are still honing the skill of differentiating reality from representation and at the age of seven children have solidified themselves as rational thinkers based in reality. Adults – especially parents and figures that children trust – aid in the child's ability to discern what is real and what is not. Children are more likely to

believe lessons about the nature of reality, however, from someone they trust.

However, difficult topics and situations may present themselves during this fragile period. If a child is not well supported by adults he or she will become thoroughly confused, unable to analyze and adapt to what is being presented to him or her. Children that have access to a stronger adult support system will most likely be stronger learners as they regularly receive assistance in forming their interpretations of the world. Putting a child on stage to portray a difficult, or what might be considered “more adult,” situation does not have to be detrimental to the child. A foundational adult support system is useful to help guide them through the process of interpreting the actions on stage and what is or is not appropriate in a real life situation.

Introducing a child to adult topics contained in a dramatic situation may not be necessary to communicate plot points to an audience. Substitution is a technique used by many professional actors in the theatre. The director of a production could choose to employ substitution to achieve the effect wanted in a more adult scene, for example telling the child to act as if they were scared of a large insect rather than an abusive parent. But is this fair to the child’s experience if they are unclear what they will actually be representing to others? If someone chooses to involve a child I would suggest that they should also



be involved in fully bringing that child into a discussion of themes as much as any of the other actors so as not to underestimate their ability to perceive. A trusted adult, acting as a guide through a child's experience of a role and confrontation with the issues contained in a given process provides a safe and pedagogical environment.

For another route, consider the Steppenwolf production of *The Pain and the Itch*. Steppenwolf attempted to shield the children's involvement with adult themes in the hopes that they simply would not understand what happened onstage during the performances of the play. In this case, it was deemed necessary, but what are those circumstances in which it is advisable to shield the child from the themes of the play? If the director or parent feels that the child should not be exposed even in an educational manner to the material on stage, then perhaps the child is indeed too young to participate or be employed by the company. As before, the decision is not written in stone and must involve a compromise between the child, the child's guardian, the director, and the cast.

Rather than exposing their child to the theatre process parents often choose not to put their child through an experience in which they are confronted with controversial adult material. Writing a character to be played by a child within a play with complicated themes is, therefore, a bold move by the playwright. To produce the play, a theatre company

must assume that everyone involved in the process will be dedicated to assisting the child as they encounter difficult subject matter. Due to this extra commitment from the cast and crew, plays involving children are performed less often.

Children learn by doing. The theatre offers a platform by which adults oversee young people in the art of playing pretend while guiding them towards a developed moral sense.

Dramatic play or 'make believe,' is the natural way suggested by the child as his own inherited method of socializing facts. He will learn not only to perform the most irksome tasks but to develop a spirit of responsibility toward their continued performance, if the pretend instinct be rightly utilized in his training (Heniger 22).

When assisting them in the art of play, the child's trainer or overseer is accountable for ensuring that the child socializes the material in an accurate and morally responsible manner.

Children are not robots to whom we can assign duties and expect them to act ignorantly or with disinterest. To ignore that a child who is taking part in the theatre process and may have special needs and is present on stage is to assume that the child has nothing to contribute, or the child deserves no special consideration when dealing with traumatic material. If a child is to be used, it falls under the responsibility of the director and the cast to be sensitive about the subject matter being performed. I also believe that the process will be more beneficial to all involved if that child can be brought into the process as a knowledgeable

contributor. I submit that care needs to be taken in the treatment of children performing on stage. While respecting the wishes of a parent or guardian, a child who is able to separate their reality from the character they are portraying should not be left in the dark.

No method exists for adults to be able to tell whether or not a child is ready to encounter certain material. The question of age-appropriateness involves a question of what the age and circumstances are that children are able to separate a character from reality or from their self. In a psychological study of children, Jeanne Klein asserts, “Only a mind which can appreciate *both* a literal and a ‘poetic’ formulation of an idea is in a position to distinguish the figure from its meaning” (42). A child’s ability to discuss what they have just experienced is not as advanced as that of an adult; this does not mean, however, that children aren’t bringing ideas of their own into the theatre. The theatre may change and influence children but children might also have an effect upon the interpretation of the script.

Children do not come to the theatre as *tabulae rasae* (blank slates), upon which plays imprint ‘new’ ideas in their minds and hearts, but as already complete human beings with multifarious experiences and knowledge about theatre and life itself. By age six, they have already constructed basic story schemas for drama, having role-played their own scripts in pretend since age three; and they know many theatrical conventions from watching television and film (Klein 44).

Both child actors and those present in the audience bring their individual life experiences, histories, and ideas with them.

Currently, similar notions of fear exist in deciding whether to allow children to perform in professional adult productions as in the Gerry Laws of the early twentieth century. Fear that children will be forced to rush their childhood along at too early of an age or that their concepts of what is right could be corrupted prevents children from being allowed to be involved in many activities. However, actions taken to prevent childhood corruption might also be hindering children from obtaining a fuller theatrical and young professional experience. An opportunity is present within these adult-themed plays to guide children through a discussion of these difficult topics—such as war and death—with the goal of helping them become better adjusted individuals and members of their communities who can deal with difficult issues in positive and creative ways.

CHAPTER III  
HARSH LANGUAGE AND TOPICS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
IN *THE PAIN AND THE ITCH*

*The Pain and the Itch* by Bruce Norris is a play rife with swear words and racial slurs inappropriate for a child audience. The play's content drove the Chicago community, and even the greater theatre community, into strong controversy in the summer of 2005 when it was produced at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company employing two girls, one entering kindergarten and the other in first grade, to play the role of Kayla. In *The Pain and the Itch* a young girl named Kayla, the daughter of an upper middle class dysfunctional family, contracted an STD presumably from her uncle. As noted before, she walks around the stage with one hand in her diaper to suggest that she is scratching her genitals. Norris aims, both through his specific stage directions and through his aggressive dialogue, to disturb the audience. By examining the production of *The Pain and the Itch* at Steppenwolf, I will identify the pitfalls and challenges of doing adult theatre with child actors involved. I provide a narrative of the controversial Steppenwolf production of *The*

*Pain and the Itch* including reviews, a letter to the editor from the parent of one of the child actors, as well as audience reactions to the show.

Ironically, the parent characters in the play, Clay and Kelly, argue about how best to protect their daughter from getting any sort of illness. They get rid of their cat because they are worried about diseases coming from the litter, they obsess about the germs from rodents, and they worry about the potential their child could contract lice or have her health compromised by cigarette smoke. Kelly yells at her husband for calling a rodent removal place that uses neurotoxins in their spray saying “Might as well spray Agent Orange on our children” (12). Kelly, however, also nixes the idea of using a glue trap to catch the rodent. “I just don’t think that allowing your daughter to watch an animal writhe to a slow sadistic death in a puddle of glue is the best way to solve the problem” (Norris 12). Later in the evening, a young woman named Kalina plays with Kayla and starts to make her up with lipstick. Kelly goads Clay to make Kalina stop and so he asks Kalina, “Given the world we’re living in. You know? With what kids are exposed to . . . Wouldn’t we rather protect them from certain premature experiences? Don’t you think? Developmentally? Isn’t that more or less obvious?” (34). At first Clay and Kelly appear to be the stereotypical set of concerned and overprotective parents.

Clay and Kelly’s dialogue about protecting Kayla and their baby seems absurd paired with the fact that they are constantly yelling and

swearing in front of their daughter. Lloyd Evans of *The Spectator* notes in his review of the London Royal Court production, “Norris’s barbed dialogue glitters with hostility” (Evans 49). Swearing abounds with the word “fuck” appearing three times within a mere six lines while Kayla is on stage. In this dialogue at the end of first act Cash says, “Just change what you fucking *preach*.” Clay responds, “Oh, fuck *you*. Up on your mountaintop.” A few lines later Kelly is nursing and her nipple gets bitten causing her to cry out “*Owww!!! Jesus. Fucking teeth*” (31). In the second act Clay implies that he might as well kill himself stating, “Why don’t I just go upstairs and *hang* myself? . . . Clearly I’m worthless. Clearly I’m horrible . . . I’ll get a rope or maybe a belt. And I’ll just hang myself” (45). The mother of one of the child actors in the play, Michelle Dolan addresses this dialogue in a letter to the editor: “The words ‘hang myself’ means to her that the father wants to turn himself into a marionette like Pinocchio” (Dolan 4). This comment makes clear that Dolan’s daughter was not capable of fully comprehending the material in the script. Dolan makes no effort to correct her daughter’s perception of the lines insinuating that she does both does not feel that she is able to engage in a productive and educational conversation with her daughter surrounding the play.

The language on stage suggests that the child actors cannot be entirely blocked from the adult content while on stage. Offstage, Steppenwolf continued to take precautions to guard the children.

During both rehearsal and performances, child actors are under constant supervision. They are attended to off-stage and in their dressing rooms by an adult. This adult, known as the "child wrangler" provides supervision: she takes them to the bathroom, cues them to go on-stage and looks over them during the show when they are not on-stage. The child wrangler is a former Steppenwolf intern, Alyson Roux, whom the children and parents met during the audition process (*Steppenwolf*).

Steppenwolf indicates that the parents were always allowed to watch the rehearsals at which their child had to be present. Allowing the parents to watch implies that Steppenwolf, as a professional theatre company preferred the parent not to participate or become involved in an artistic discussion of the script. Parents were, however, asked to read over the script before their child was even allowed to audition to ensure that it was a project they felt was acceptable for their child to participate in.

During the first audition, director Anna D. Shapiro and Steppenwolf Casting Director Erica Daniels met with each child actor and made sure they truly wanted to spend their summer acting in a play with adults. After the children expressed genuine interest, their parents were brought in to confirm the nature of the play and its requirements and commitment. Daniels and Shapiro also solicited and responded to any questions about the adult themes in the play, and how this material would be handled. They once more confirmed that the parents had read the script (*Steppenwolf*).

After the initial audition section the director and casting director called back those children whose parents were supportive and who seemed



mature enough to handle the work demands and the script. “Shapiro and Daniels held a callback session in which child actors were 'directed' and given tasks to perform. Any questions or concerns were again solicited from the parents” (*Steppenwolf*).

The swearing and profanity on stage concerned audience member and Steppenwolf season ticket holder Joshua Strauss. Strauss, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Northwestern University, expressed his shock that children were a part of the performance. He says of the repeated curse words and racial slurs used, “For a child to hear this language once is one thing, but to hear it over and over during the entire run is something else entirely” (Davenport 57). Strauss also says, “I’m not looking to muzzle the playwright. He certainly brought up issues I think need to be explored, but those issues could have been brought up without exposing a child to them” (Davenport 59). Strauss expresses a valid concern: the two five and six-year-old girls involved in the performance are not only experiencing the trauma of the language once or twice during a safe rehearsal but all summer continuously for the run of the play. Inevitably, in *The Pain and the Itch*, the harsh dialogue is impossible to keep from the child actors and would make an impression after so many repetitions. Hilton Als for the *New Yorker* sums up Playwrights Horizons’ version of the play:

Set in the Ikea-furnished home of Clay and Kelly, a thirty-something couple who can barely stand each other but still feel compelled to produce their own objects of status and well being—children—the play is as much about Clay and Kelly’s manipulations and prejudices as it is about their misguided perception of themselves (Als 3).

To this critic, the play centers around the dysfunction of the adults and their projection of this dysfunction onto their children. The parents in the play, Clay and Kelly, constantly project manipulations, dysfunction, and prejudice onto their daughter, but hopefully not onto the actual child portraying her.

Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune* responded that the shock value of having a child on stage was not effective. Jones felt that instead of drawing the audience in, the child actor in Steppenwolf’s production of *The Pain and the Itch* “pulled audiences out of the world of the play because of the concerns her presence raised” (Istel 115). Readers wrote in to the newspaper questioning the child actors’ parents’ choice to put their child in such an offensive play. The Chicago community questioned Steppenwolf’s techniques for protecting the child. Steppenwolf stated clearly in their response to the article and to concerns of readers that the two young girls acting in the production were protected. They felt that necessary precautions were taken so as not to expose the children to the sexual themes and language in the play. The theatre’s website addresses potential audience concern in this statement: “the child actors were

treated in a manner both professional and mindful of [the child actor's] ages" (*Steppenwolf*). The director and cast ensured that the child actor's back was turned when pornography was played on the television and worked to create a positive atmosphere both in rehearsals and in the greenroom during the run of the show.

There certainly are a great number of child actors that do have a positive experience despite their involvement in an adult play. However, the motive that often drives a child's involvement in professional theatre is that "more often, no doubt, child actors simply [are] products of childhood infatuations or parental ambitions" (McArthur 65). Parental motivation is certainly a possible question in the minds of audience members when watching a play such as *The Pain and the Itch*, deemed inappropriate for children, yet containing children. Like the managers of post-Victorian child actors some fame-hungry parents will use their child to make a fortune no matter the moral cost. Yet Michelle Dolan, mother to one of the young girls portraying Kayla in the *Steppenwolf* production makes a surprisingly strong case for choosing to involve her child. Dolan comments that, although she does not currently consider her daughter a victim to the play and its material "I would call her a casualty if we had said no and deprived her of the opportunity of a lifetime because we were more interested in insulating our world from what others might think than putting her interests first" (4). Dolan argues as a parent for her

child's right to what she views as a positive experience, chance for growth, and jumpstart to her professional acting career.

Dolan believes that she is allowing her child a powerful experience that will allow her opportunity to learn and grow. She cites discussions between the parents and their daughter about subjects such as the yelling in the play. When asked about the yelling on stage, Michelle Dolan's daughter responded, "They're loud because they are on stage. Oh! And also, they are professionals!" (Dolan 4). Dolan's daughter, Hailey, uses the word "professional" as a positive word and excuse for the language on stage demonstrating that perhaps the importance of being a professional actor and the dignified professional theatre were stressed in her household rather than the material in the script. Michelle Dolan points out that the adult content within the dialogue of the play is lost on her child. "She doesn't have the vocabulary or the ability to filter from the scenes when she is onstage any coherence to the story whatsoever" (Dolan 4). Dolan's comments suggest that although she involved her child in a discussion of the material, that she was merely checking to ensure that her child was not suffering any emotional damage. The Dolan parents often asked their daughter questions about her understanding of the play to gauge how the play might be affecting her without inviting any ethical discussion. In addition to checking in with her child, Michelle Dolan did attend many of the rehearsals of the play as

an advocate of her daughter's safety and well-being. The questions Dolan chose to ask her daughter suggest that she preferred to leave her daughter with a misunderstanding of the script rather than invoking any sort of pedagogical dialogue surrounding it. Interestingly Dolan and Steppenwolf eventually removed her daughter from the show perhaps due to the pressure the mother felt from all of the controversy.

Once a show goes into production, however, much of the control is taken out of the parents' hands: their child becomes involved as a performer within the production. It ultimately falls on the shoulders of the producing company—working with the parents of the young artist—to ensure that the child's experience and interaction with the theatre is a positive one. Steppenwolf, as a regional company that likes to push audience comfort and boundaries, may have a higher tolerance for including provocative issues on their stage than a more local company or community theatre with a somewhat more conservative base.

CHAPTER IV  
THEMES OF SOCIAL VIOLENCE, LOSS, AND GRIEF  
IN *THE TROJAN WOMEN*

During the twentieth century, *The Trojan Women* “has become one of the most frequently performed of all Euripides’ plays” (Hall xiii). Euripides’ classic play includes a scene in which a child is torn from his mother’s leg and then the dialogue in text reveals that the child has been murdered. Later, his body appears onstage and is mourned by the remaining women. The image of the condemned child clinging to his mother’s leg would not be as powerful without the actual presence of the child’s body. In this chapter, I will explore the historical use of the child body on stage as well as discuss methods used in the spring 2007 production at the University of Oregon in order to empower the child actor. My academic time at the University of Oregon has presented me with the opportunity to engage with both the director of this production as well as the parent of one of the child actors involved even though the performance occurred before my time at the university. Since I had access to these members of the production I include an interview with that child’s parent and discussion of directorial techniques to assess what was and was not pedagogically effective in this production.

In production *The Trojan Women* raises a history of child actors used on stage for dramatic effect. The history of this play dates to ancient Greece in 415 BC. Euripides employs “frequent (and tear-jerking) use of speaking children” (Davis 61). Davis explains that the image of a child on stage was so important to the ancient Greeks, that to achieve appropriate vocal volume in a performance, an adult actor recited child’s lines while the child was onstage. Vey notes that Euripides’ frequent inclusion of children in his plays “testifies to his perception of their dramatic utility” (4). He not only includes the brutal treatment of children in *Trojan Women*, but also in *Andromache*, in which her son is nearly murdered; *Hecuba*, where the queen’s attendants slaughter the two sons of a woman who was once her ally, and most famously; *Medea*, in which Medea kills her own children.

The ancient Greeks included children on stage not only for the child to perform an act of worship (Greek theatre being both a communal and religious act) but also to confront their audience with a powerful tragic image, with the intent of bringing an equally powerful catharsis to the watching community. Shauna Vey notes that even though the actors of this time period wore masks preventing the original Greek audience of *Trojan Women* from seeing specific expression on the boy or his mother, the outlines of their bodies and the childlike way in which he looked up at her and clung to her clothing would have still been effective. “It was

the vision of the living boy that imparted dramatic power to Hecuba's speech over his dead body" (Vey 5). Although we cannot know exactly the motivation for the Greeks to have included children in their plays what is important to note is that when these plays are performed today child actors are more often than not included.

In *Trojan Women*, it is difficult to shelter children in the play or audience from the violence of war and the grief stricken survivors. Before her son's murder, Andromache gives several monologues with Astyanax by her side with a barrage of brutal words such as "murder," "death," and "killing." Andromache talks in detail about her son's impending death and how he will be hurled from the top of a wall, his neck broken, and be spared no pity. The explicit nature in which the child's death is described and the appearance of the body on stage soon after makes shielding a child involved in the scene from the subjects of murder and death impossible. Edith Hall notes in her introduction to Morwood's translation that ritual was important to the Greeks and therefore, "Hecuba actually prepares the corpse of the baby Atyanax for burial in front of the audience" (xxxvii). Should the director choose to include a corporeal representation of the child on stage to act as the dead body, it will undoubtedly have a different effect on a child's experience with the production than a choice less rooted in reality.



Confronting war involves addressing violence and death. Edith Hall describes the major tragedies suffered by the women of Euripides' *Trojan*

*Women*:

The play thus shows with devastating clarity not only how men in wartime treat women and children, but how women barbarized by men blame other women, and how humans in desperate straits exhaust their emotional energies on attributing blame and exacting punishment rather than on thinking constructively about the future (xxvii).

Writing with a modern lens, Ellen McLaughlin includes these same themes, setting the play during the recent Balkan Wars in a refugee camp. In the spring of 2007, the University of Oregon opened a production of McLaughlin's version of *Trojan Women* directed by Theresa May. On stage was contemporary rubble from blown up buildings, trash, and a tall barbed-wire fence. The male soldier appeared in contemporary military garb and photographs of the Iraqi war remains were used as backdrops.

In this production of *Trojan Women*, director Theresa May cast two child actors, a kindergarten boy around the same age as the girls in *The Pain and the Itch* as well as a fifth grade girl. She took precautions to shield the children from the violence occurring onstage. In this section I detail the steps taken during University of Oregon's *Trojan Women* to protect the child actors including a discussion of the choice to allow a child to see the entire show, the level of parental involvement both during

rehearsals and during production, the importance of debriefing the play with the child, and the addition of optional distractions. I include an interview with the parent of one of the child actors. The younger child actor played the role of Astyanax while the fifth-grade girl mingled with the chorus but also had moments of experiencing the dramatic action alone. When Talthybius comes to the women's camp to take the young Astyanax away and execute him, he is clear in his intentions stating that the council has decreed that the boy must die and "be hurled from the battlements of Troy. The top of the city walls" (McLaughlin 111-12). McLaughlin dictates in her script that the child is onstage with his mother during this dialogue and would probably hear this graphic pronouncement of his character's coming death.

The young kindergarten-aged boy playing Astyanax, accompanied by his mother, opted to watch the entire play, even those scenes in which he was not present. During a usual run of the show, the young boy would run offstage followed by his friend and fellow actor, James Engberg, who played the soldier. Engberg would give his young scene partner a high five and take him to the green room. The boy might have been unaware until he watched the full show that Engberg was actually perceived by the audience to have taken him offstage to kill him. The sound of a gunshot is heard as soon as the two disappear to inform the audience that the male soldier has executed Astyanax.

In allowing the boy to view the majority of the play, he became privy to the inferred deaths and sorrow portrayed. Without having seen a more full version of the production, he might have never known what the play was about. He would have faithfully repeated his performance as instructed, excited by the prospect of being in front of an audience. While I could not speak with the young boy involved or his parent, the parent of the young actor playing a street girl was able to speak with me. She reveals the structure of the rehearsal process and her own interactive relationship to the production. She spoke to the benefits her own daughter experienced from seeing the entirety of the play noting that her daughter was able to further develop her character and create her own “street kid” story inspired by the story being told by the play as a whole. This young girl decided that she would like to place her characters most treasured toy on top of the boy’s corpse then she decided that she would choose to stay among people she knew rather than tough it out alone.

This little interaction and several others like it grew out of her seeing the full play, having conversations with adult cast members and us, her parents – and as she began to understand what the play was about and what story the director was trying to tell, she assumed much more responsibility for her character and sort of began to understand and identify with her character to a much greater degree (Anonymous parent).

Having a clear understanding of the play aided this fifth-grade child actor to make her own discoveries and character choices. The kindergarten boy might not have been able to process the play and take it on like this girl

was able to do, but nonetheless might still have gained a more full understanding about what the play meant and what the audience was experiencing.

I asked the parent of the girl to what extent the parent attended and participated in the rehearsal process. She responded,

I was there for almost every rehearsal . . . when I could not be there her dad was there. In the beginning I sat in the house throughout the whole rehearsal, but as she got more comfortable with the group I backed off to give her space to develop relationships on her own. I would then sit in the lobby and read, or in the green room—letting her know where I would be if she needed me. Usually I would hang out during breaks—but even that became unnecessary as she formed her own relationships. As long as she knew I was in the building somewhere, she was fine (Anonymous parent).

Many benefits result from this level of parental involvement. Having the parent present and willing to participate in discussions is crucial to the child feeling secure and comfortable during the earlier stages of the rehearsal process, especially when the other adults involved in the process are not familiar. During the early stages the parent can aid the cast and director in quelling any fears or answering any questions that the child actor may have, which he or she does not feel comfortable sharing with a stranger. Allowing a parent to be present during rehearsal, however, can risk making the parent feel that it is appropriate to assert their input into the production process. Making it clear to the parent that their input is welcome in certain areas such as the safety of

their child, but inappropriate in other areas such as the interpretation of the script, is important to address early on in the agreement. A parent who allows their older child some space will more easily permit their child to become a part of the creative process as an individual.

The fifth-grade female in *Trojan Women* at the University of Oregon was involved in the rehearsal discussions along with the rest of the cast. She also had both the ancient Greek tragedy and modern telling explained to her both by the director and her parents. Debriefing sessions both during rehearsals with the cast and afterwards with the parent were crucial to the child's understanding of the play and process.

It [war and violence and dealing with the aftermath of it] is a heavy thing for a 5<sup>th</sup> grader to have to work so intimately with—all the images used in the course of the production, the group discussion and large emotions portrayed by the adult cast members sometimes left me wondering if it was too much for her. But in our talks on the way home from rehearsal it became clear to me that de-briefing done as a group as well as the conversations I had with her, seemed to serve to help her deal with any built up anxiety or larger emotions of fear that might have snuck in (Anonymous parent).

New emotions and questions are part of the production process for any actor. For a child, this journey, albeit a representational one, may be emotionally and mentally taxing.

The addition of optional distractions on stage is a valuable way to make the child feel comfortable and safe when surrounded by harsh dialogue or scenarios. As any actor finds release or outlet to assist them

through a difficult process on stage, so will a child actor. The director and the young girl in *Trojan Women* playing the street kid together devised certain places where she could stash items a street kid might keep.

She was part of the whole process—the crying, the keening, the death scene, the violence in the prison camp ... but in her own street-smart street-child way—which allowed her a lot of freedom to come and go on stage and to hide in the sets small cubby holes and debris—she made a home in one of these debris cubby holes and brought in things of her own that a street child might (in her imagination) have in their secret hiding place ... a torn notepad of paper, some broken pencils, some old yarn, a broken doll, items like that. These items not only helped her add to her character, but also to take her away from the action when that was what she needed to do (Anonymous parent).

The items that the child accumulated as her personal props on stage were of personal value to her. They provided her with an optional distraction when she was not required to participate in the main action on stage. Extra props, like in this example, function as a tool for the child actor to opt out anytime that they are uncomfortable.

*Trojan Women* at the University of Oregon succeeded in involving the child actors as part of the process and made the process valuable to the children as an educational and artistic experience. In her introduction to *Trojan Women*, McLaughlin says of the project, “I have always felt that theatre has a singular capability to teach us about the nature of community and how we can collaborate to transcend even the most terrible pain caused by human divisiveness and rancor” (88).

Discussions with the cast and director as well as the inclusion of parents assists the child to sort through any adult topics and images brought up. The parent I interviewed noted that the discussion surrounding *Trojan Women*, especially about war and the brutality that defines it, generated positive discussion and knowledge in her child. "It made her much more aware of the atrocities that were being perpetrated around the world by our government". The same parent notes that her child is now more knowledgeable about war than other students her age. "I think it made her understand and be aware of current news in a way that her peers were not" (Anonymous parent). Therefore, participating in theatre and portraying characters and circumstances on stage in a positive environment can have the potential to aid a child in navigating real world issues when they later come face-to-face with them.

Theatre is not only capable of dramaturgical teaching surrounding one central idea presented in a specific production, but also of introducing experiences that foster the development of important life skills. According to her parent, the young female actor in *Trojan Women* gained valuable life social experience as a result of her participation in the production.

I think that [being involved in the play] taught her some great skills in the area of persevering through a process, team building, communication with adults, listening, asserting herself when need be, and the importance of full participation in and input into a creative process (Anonymous parent).

The University of Oregon's production of *Trojan Women* succeeded in setting up a safe pedagogical environment. The parent was invited and included along with the child and the child was also made to feel as if they were part of the working cast. This invitation to contribute and be included empowered the child actors to engage with the issues inherent in the process. This production provides a strong example of how the inclusion of child actors is mutually beneficial for all parties involved. Here, the benefit is both personal knowledge of current and past world events and a positive artistic experience.



## CHAPTER V

### PHYSICAL ABUSE AND TORTURE IN *THE PILLOWMAN*

In the fall of 2007, the Lord Leebrick Theatre Company in Eugene, Oregon produced the edgy play *The Pillowman* by Irish playwright Martin McDonagh. *The Pillowman* asks the audience to consider the line between reality and fiction. Much like my own question surrounding a child actor's ability to perceive the truth, McDonagh asks if one's perception of a story as reality can damage one's psyche. *The Pillowman* is pertinent to this study for its excessive use of physical violence. Unlike *The Pain and the Itch* and *Trojan Women*, which focus more on verbal violence and broader social issues, *The Pillowman* demonstrates specific acts of physical violence to children on stage. The embodied violence on stage, as opposed to implied violence, poses a distinct ethical problem. In *The Pillowman* the child is actually experiencing a representation of the violence on stage rather than merely hearing about it.

I attended this production after having just seen a production the previous year at A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle, Washington. The productions I saw were similar in that they both included two children of like ages. I have chosen to focus on the Lord Leebrick production,

however, as it is the most recent in my mind and because I was able to contact and speak with the director of the production, who is also the artistic director of the theatre company, to interrogate his methods and process vis-à-vis the children who were cast.

McDonagh employs two brothers in *The Pillowman*, a fiction writer, Katurian, and his brother Michal, who appears to be mentally handicapped. The brothers appear for an interrogation related to several crimes occurring in reality that mimic ex post facto crimes Katurian has written into stories. Throughout the course of *The Pillowman*, Katurian's fictional stories are repeated to the audience through the convention of verbal story telling: Katurian retelling a story to Michal, or Michal recalling a story and telling it back to Katurian (as is the case of *The Little Green Pig*). Artistic Director of the Lord Leebrick Theatre Company, Craig Willis, directed the *The Pillowman* and chose to have two actors, ages thirteen and fourteen, portray the boy and girl reenacting the brutal tales. This choice was not a departure from McDonagh, as the ages of the children are not specified. McDonagh does not include any indication in the play or his notes as to whether it is important to him that actual children portray the child characters. The choice of whether or not to include child actors is therefore left in the hands of the theatre company and director. Willis' choice for the age of the youth actors was driven mostly by the fact that their parents were already cast in the play.

The previous involvement of the parents made casting these particular, teenage children an easy decision for Willis. Had, these children been younger, however, I would be curious if Willis would have still cast the production the same or if auditions for the roles of the children would have been held. Using slightly older actors allows Willis to feel secure in the fact that he will not be strongly challenging the children and community as much as would have been the case had younger actors been used. Developmentally, youth actors that are thirteen and fourteen are in a very different place and easier to use in any community versus choosing to employ younger actors of five and six years old or even as old as ten. Willis notes,

Given the heightened style of the storytelling sequences in *Pillowman* you can fudge the ages of the actors slightly and the audience goes along with believing the characters are younger than the age of the actors portraying them (Willis).

*The Pillowman* at Lord Leebrick Theatre Company was fortunate in that the parent characters in the storytelling sequences were the actual parents of the child actors. Because the parents were already required to be at all of the same rehearsals as the children acting in the production, it naturally fell upon the shoulders of the parents to see to the safety, education, and wellness of their child. Willis was able to consider the children and parents in the roles without having to undergo an audition

process. Willis sums up his casting process for both the child actors and the roles their parents played with them, stating,

The parents of both of the youth actors had participated in our adult acting courses and had both played minor roles in a production of Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*. The young male actor had also been a participant in one of our teen acting camps. I met the young female actor at a cast party for *Mother Courage*. There were not open auditions for the role. Instead I read these two actors after they and their parents had first been given the opportunity to read the script. Then we talked about the play and I read them in the roles (Willis).

It is vital to allow the parents of any potential child actor a full read-through of the script prior to any sort of agreement. Young teenage actors should not fall as an exception to this rule and Willis shows a strong example of this by screening the content with their parents first even though this was not a traditional "open audition" process. Willis also made clear to me that he prefers to refer to children as "youth" as he feels that it is a more appropriate and sensitive word due to his experience as a teaching artist.

According to Willis, "What makes *Pillowman* adult-themed is mostly the inclusion of described violence along with a fairly blasphemous depiction of a young girl believing she is Jesus" (Willis). The scene to which Willis refers is a retelling of a story Katurian has written. In the Lord Leebrick production, child actors reenacted the story onstage as it was told. In the tale of *The Little Jesus Girl*, a young girl who was tortured by her foster parents becomes religious and wishes to imitate

Jesus. Her abusive foster parents concede that they will indeed treat her just like Jesus by embedding a barbed wire crown of thorns into her head, whipping her with a cat-o'-nine tails, and forcing her to carry a heavy wooden cross around the living room one hundred times. The foster parents proceed to crucify the little girl. Once crucified, they ask her if she still wishes to be just like Jesus, to which the girl responds, "No. I don't want to be like Jesus. I fucking *am* Jesus" (48). The little girl is then stabbed by her foster parents and buried alive in a coffin. The abusive foster parents last words to her are, "Well, if you're Jesus, you'll rise again in three days, won't you?" (McDonaugh 48). "The Little Jesus Girl" scene poses many concerns for a director working with child actors. Willis recalls that he worried before the play was cast about potential conflict between the religious views of the child actors and their parents and the profound challenges in the play.

When asked if he had any regrets about involving children in the production or if he thought the same effects could have using adults in their place Willis responded with a simple "No and no." Noting that he did not consider the actors used to be young children, Willis and the cast made an effort to treat the teenagers just like the rest of the adults in the cast.

The youth actors participated in table sessions and presented their own questions both then and in later rehearsals. I seem to remember some conversations with the parents that happened

prior to the first rehearsals—more aimed at easing parental concerns than youth concerns (Willis).

Willis treated the youth actors in the cast as adults due to both the fact that their parents were present in the cast (and consented to the policy) and the fact that the themes were not perceived to be harmful to the child's emotional well-being. Treating the youth actors as adults in the cast was also possible in large part due to the fact that the children were young teenagers with a more developed ability to comprehend the theatrical process and interpret adult themes.

Although Lord Leebrick did not post an age minimum, McDonaugh's *The Pillowman*, is a play addressed towards an adult audience. McDonaugh complicates this "adult" play by including two child characters. Davis and Evans state, and director Craig Willis seems to agree as a theatre artist having previously worked with youth, that "we have a mandate to err on the side of stretching rather than on the side of underestimation" (79). Quality in art is not measured by how safe a production remains but instead becomes more intriguing if it succeeds in shaking people up even if in an unpleasant way. Nevertheless, Willis chose to use teenage actors in his production proving that he still maintains a valid concern for exposing a younger child to the same subject matter.

Unlike *The Pain and the Itch*, where a child actor must be involved in order to realistically portray a four year old, *The Pillowman* allows for more flexibility in casting the age of the youth actors. It is not clear how old the children are in the stories and the retelling of a fictional tale need not be entirely realistic, therefore, it makes both practical and artistic sense to lean towards older rather than younger youth actors. The set design in the Lord Leebrick Theatre Company's production included strangely shaped picture frames and garish colors in the sequences where Katurian's stories are retold. These choices indicate that Willis' goal was not to aim for perfect realism, but to portray a feeling and emotion through an artistic (and therefore less emotionally harmful) means.

Willis made a choice to incorporate slightly older and emotionally mature youth actors in *The Pillowman* in these challenging roles because it was easy to cast. Despite the ease of this choice due to Willis' situation, he continued to consider the well-being of the young adults and was able to push the youth actors to learn personally and artistically from their involvement in the production. The use of older actors was also important because of the degree and amount of physical violence that the children in this particular production needed to embody on stage. Going through the motions of a violent act requires a level of emotional maturity that might not yet be present in a child still in grade school.

## CHAPTER VI

CHILD SUICIDE IN *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR*

I was fortunate to see a production of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* at the Gielgud Theatre in London in 2008, put together by the Headlong Theatre Company. Headlong acts as a regional theatre in England giving it a similar stature to that of Steppenwolf in the United States. This production was a new adaptation of Pirandello's classic play by Rupert Goold and Ben Power, directed by Goold. In Goold's production, "the six characters present, with bloodcurdling effect, a dysfunctional family ruptured by rancour, sex and death" (Callan 55). The production was updated: set in modern time and adapting the story to one in which a female film director is working to finish a documentary about terminally ill patients and in particular a boy who wishes to die. This concept (and that of the original play) questions the reality of the layered stories and therefore encourages the audience to question what elements of the narrative are real or fictional, ultimately turning the question inward on their own lives. In *Six Characters*, a family of characters (played by actors) also interacts with a set of actors (also played by actors) attempting to portray them and their story.



Between these two worlds, “Theatre becomes a kind of security zone between non-cohering realms, the threshold between the twin problematics of the playwright’s imagination and the materiality of the world” (Fuchs 156). *Six Characters in Search of an Author* questions the very nature of perception and truth. Will children perceive the situations and characters as truth?

In Goold and Power’s *Six Characters*, the youngest boy and the girl act out their own suicide on stage. Freya Parker portrays the girl in the Goold production, whose character runs parallel to that of Pirandello’s young girl character. After failed attempts by the actors to successfully portray the six characters, “The tragic denouement is then rendered raw, immediate and strange with the drowning of Freya Parker’s girl, submerged in a fish tank” (de Jongh 42). Parker struggles and splashes in the tank and then floats face down in the water for several minutes after her drowning (aided by some sort of underwater breathing apparatus shielded from the audience). The age that Parker lists on her acting resume that she believes she can play on stage is twenty-one years old. Because Parker’s playing age is so much older, she provides a strong example of how older actors may justifiably and convincingly portray children on stage as she reads a thirteen or fourteen year old girl in this production. She plays “The Girl” quietly and modestly, often being staged low to the ground, costumed in a childlike dress, and using very

modest physical movement. Although Pirandello has written into his script that the age of “The Girl” is four years old while the age of “The Boy” is fourteen, Goold and Power seem to have switched the ages of the two children. “The Boy,” a role shared by both Elliot Horne and Bailey Pepper, looks a maximum of seven years of age and never spoke throughout the entire play—although he was present for all scenes where the family of characters were present.

In Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the older “Son” narrates the death of the boy to the audience, describing how the boy looked at his drowned sister in the fountain and then, “From behind the trees where the BOY has been hiding, a revolver shot rings out” (Pirandello 115). Instead, in Goold and Power’s version, after the girl has drowned herself in a fish tank (not a fountain) the boy also violently kills himself onstage, alone, by thrusting a knife into himself and falling down limp and bloody. This action is in plain sight of the audience with no effort to shield the horror with a simple sound effect like a gunshot. When the documentary director (the equivalent of Pirandello’s “Director”) discovers the dead boy’s body on the stage floor, she picks him up and carries him around the stage trying to figure out whether what she is seeing and experiencing is truly real. “She stumbles, clutching a dead child, into a performance of *Les Mis* [the performance playing at the

theatre next door] and ultimately we see her become the physical victim of Pirandello's characters" (Billington 36).

Youth actors Horne and Pepper traded off the duty of playing the young boy much like the two young girls involved in *The Pain and the Itch*. Having another child with whom to share the burden makes not only the time commitment less severe (and also makes it legal, considering union laws). It also allows the child a peer to relate to and lessens the frequency they must perform their suicide.

The children's presence in the play and suicides on stage is undoubtedly shock value. Shock value and the portrayal of a dark world is the aim of even Pirandello's original script. A reviewer sums up Goold's new production at the Gielgud in London: "what counts is the way Goold's production captures the chaos and pain of the disruptive family and the dark fear that lies at the heart of Pirandello's play" (Billington 36). How better to create this dark fear and pain than by putting children into these complicated scenarios. What is so captivating, shocking, and intriguing is that these children are young and innocent and yet find already that their lives reach a dead end. Suicide is not normally associated with young children, whom adults generally consider objects of perfect naïve happiness. Goold and Powers, and Pirandello before them, challenge their audience to question those previous notions of children. They also throw into question, along with Pirandello, the nature

of illusion versus reality. In *Six Characters*, children take their own fates into account and execute free will. As in McDonough's *Pillowman*, the children in *Six Characters* experience disappointment, tragedy, and total despair to the point that they feel their only option is death.

During everyday play, children often act out death and dying. There is a mystery involved in what it is like to have one's body stop moving, living, and breathing. Toy stores market toy weapons such as pop-guns, swords, and the *Star Wars* light sabers with which children act out fighting and dying. Suicide, however, is not a subject of which many young children are aware. The concept of taking away one's own life is against human instinct. Humans are taught, and genetically wired, to aim for survival. I have chosen to include a discussion of this particular play because of the unique addition of self-mutilation and suicide to violent adult topics. Although the topic of suicide might not be foreign to a thirteen-year-old youth or older, a child of any age will have certain boundaries surrounding the topic of suicide. Even if a youth actor has a previous knowledge of suicide, the adults involved are obligated to make clear that suicide is a tragic decision with devastating results. The young children in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* have very complicated and burdened lives. They are characters trapped inside their own tragedy. The characters are trapped within their family and situation and without an author to tell their story. Making it clear that ending

one's own life is not a good option is necessary for adults to broach. Under any circumstances based in reality, any young person must understand that the best option would be for a desperate child to seek out the help of adults.

Goold keeps the young boy on stage throughout several acts of violence, including the portrayal of his own suicide on stage. In this way, much like in the other plays examined here, the boy is not shielded from the adult themes despite experiencing them theatrically. During the reenactment of the step-daughter's rape, the family erupts into operatic noises of grief while the young boy turns his body to face the wall—an action both fitting for the character as well as a technique to safeguard him from the emotional complications on stage. Although the youth actor playing the boy stabs himself, it is brief and without blood. Goold keeps the action simple without embellishing the tragic action. In this way Goold does not ask for more than the young actor will likely be able to handle.

As far as I am able to glean from the outside, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as produced by Goold succeeds in incorporating a child in a healthy relationship with the script, cast, and crew. The show, however, still left me worrying as an audience member about the young boy as his limp body is carry on and off stage in front of the cameras for several long minutes. I trust that Goold's Headlong Theatre Company did

everything that they could in order to ensure that the boy was comfortable and emotionally well taken care of and yet I can't help but think about the use of his small body on stage to induce terror and disturbance in the *Six Characters* audience. After watching the performance with my mother, the first thing we spoke of was our shock at seeing such young people commit suicide on stage as well as endure the deranged nature of the play. How did the girl breathe underwater for so long? Who was the young boy whose dead body was carried for an extended time period by a sobbing woman? Goold would have been better suited and prepared to address audience concern and response by simply adding enough details of the experience so that my mother and I, along with all of the preceding and future audience members, could understand the choices made and the methods employed. I left the theatre with many questions and concerns wishing that there had been a talk-back with the cast and crew to attend. More communication with the audience would have benefited this production that I experienced, as it might have for Steppenwolf's *The Pain and the Itch*.

## CHAPTER VII

### A PROPOSITION FOR HOW BEST TO INVOLVE CHILD ACTORS IN PLAYS WITH ADULT THEMES

Currently no consistent method exists to evaluate whether a play is hospitable for a child actor. Nor do theatre professionals have any ready guidelines when working with participating child actors. The four case studies I have employed in this manuscript demonstrate a variety of methods used and challenges faced with varying success. Having an existing protocol in place would have benefited Steppenwolf before taking on *The Pain and the Itch* as well as well as their later 2006 production of *The Pillowman*. No matter how old the underage actors might be or what their maturity level is, a reassurance that the theatre company has taken their emotional welfare and benefits into consideration is valuable.

In this chapter, I propose every theatre company establish a general model that details what questions to ask if they are considering including a child actor in a play containing adult themes. This model is meant to differ from the previous entertainment rating systems that have been set up due to the fact that the child is directly engaging with the material by participating in it rather than simply watching it.

Additionally, I recommend that theatre companies create a set of guidelines for themselves and have official policies about the process of working with child actors. This should help theatres achieve success and avoid pitfalls such as those I laid out in the four case studies: the shock of the Steppenwolf audience at how young the girls in *Pain and the Itch* were, the disputable effort to expose and discuss themes that the child is mature enough to handle in *The Trojan Women*, and the need for continual check-ins as well as an exit interview as were absent in Lord Leebrick's *The Pillowman* and in Headlong Theatre Company's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Keeping the entire company, cast, crew, and audience aware of the guidelines should prevent and address any confusion or concern. Although the didactic aim of a rubric might be in conflict with artistic impulse, I propose that there is a way to combine the two. Establishing guidelines will serve to protect the youth involved while still allowing plenty of space for artistic integrity.

First, the director must decide if the play's artistic success requires an actual child on stage (assuming that licensing doesn't require it). I condone keeping the option to include children in plays open as I have experienced the presence of young actors before on stage and know that it can be magical and add a great deal to a production. The theatre must take into consideration, however, what all the child involved might be exposed to and determine the maturity level that the production



demands along with the complications a youth actor might bring. If the benefits of including a youth actor outweigh the possible addressed negatives, then the appropriate casting method should be determined. The director must then assess how to approach adult themes, knowing that a child will be interacting with the script. Decisions on how to proceed should be case-by-case. Always, after having read the play and consenting to their child's involvement, the parents should sign a contract as with *The Pain and the Itch* and *The Pillowman*. In some cases a director might be confronted with a mature child, much like the teenage actors in *The Pillowman*, while in others the child might seem immature, naïve and unprepared to receive and process adult information as was the case in Steppenwolf's *The Pain and the Itch*. If the child appears mature, the theatre company must choose the best method to involve the child within the conversation surrounding the play and its topics in a way that takes that child's well-being into consideration.

Theatre companies' adopted plan for their company's policies should include those questions that help a theatre company undergo an initial evaluation of whether it is necessary for the involvement of a child. The questions might look like this:

1. What does this theatre company wish to say with this play?
2. Is it possible to portray the message of the play without a child actor onstage while still being true to the intent and material?

3. Is the director comfortable involving a child in the process and willing to foster the relationship between the child and the cast as a whole?

The aforementioned questions are meant to strike up a dialogue that specifically concerns the possible pitfalls, benefits, and outcomes to including a child in the production before moving forward.

### **Proposed Guidelines**

If answers to the questions above indicate that the company is still eager to include a child actor in their production, then the company moves on to a new set of guidelines and parameters to help them determine the most responsible method to incorporate this younger actor or actors. Steps should be taken to shape the child actor experience and should include:

#### ***A. Parental Involvement***

First, the director should conduct an initial discussion with both the child and the parent present that makes them aware of topics that will be portrayed and discussed in the performance. If the child is too young to talk about the subject matter then a frame discussion with the parent should take place. In this meeting the parent should be given time to ask questions after it is made clear to them the material and topics included in the play as well as the material that the child will most likely

need to be exposed to. This meeting also provides a perfect opportunity to glean the parents' ideas about how to best shield their child from the play's full content. The judgment call for whether a child is mature enough to handle a script falls under the jurisdiction of the parent, the production's director, but also is up to the child to determine if they are ready and willing to participate. All three must agree to the child's participation. If action is taken to include a child in plays dealing with topics that may not be age-appropriate, an agreement should take place in which the director and parental guardians involved discuss how the child will be protected and shielded from any potentially traumatizing subject matter. The child's age and ability must be taken into consideration both before and after casting to determine whether they are apt to enter into table discussions with the cast or, like *The Pain and the Itch*, should be sheltered from TV monitors of the show. It should also be determined if the child needs to be supervised a parent or by a chaperone responsible for monitoring the child and seeing to their well-being.

### ***B. Company and Cast Involvement***

The second step when including a child in the cast of any production is to get the actors and crew onboard to create a positive and supportive atmosphere. New York children's agent Nancy Carson writes, "The people surrounding a young performer can make a tremendous

difference not only in how he responds to pressure, but also in how he turns out as an adult” (23). I believe it is important to establish a comfortable relationship especially between the actors immediately associated with the child and the child performer so that the situation feels safe and the child has an unthreatening person or persons to trust during the process, whether he or she is on or offstage. In order to make this process work, the actors involved must go into the production understanding their responsibility towards ensuring the child’s personal and emotional safety. This is not to say that the actors act as a babysitter but should take time to interact in a positive, professional way with the child.

### ***C. Supervision***

Someone aside from the cast should be provided by the theatre company to accompany the child actor should they need assistance in remembering cues or monitoring themselves. Steppenwolf chose to use an intern introduced to the children’s parents to act as what they refer to as the “child wrangler”. This term is often associated with movie sets and is associated with those who care for animals on-set which carries complicated and unfortunate connotation. Therefore, I will choose to employ the term, “chaperone” instead to suggest one who supervises the child and sees to their well-being. It is in the best interest of the production to keep the cast, director, and crew focused on their own jobs

within the theatre and therefore behooves everyone to have an adult specifically responsible for the child actors involved. The adult responsible could potentially be the child's parent as was the case in *The Pillowman* with the teenage actors. If the parent is deemed the adult responsible for the youth actor, they should be present and aware of the material and situations their child is confronting, but should also be able to maintain their distance from the production as with the *Trojan Women* example. The child might benefit from getting some time away from the watchful eye of their parent to be involved as an individual in the production. The parent should be comfortable and trusting enough to allow the child to be with the cast or another designated guardian.

If a chaperone is designated to keep watch of the youth actors, that person must be able to work well with children, must encourage the child to focus to work efficiently, and help the young actor to build effective work habits. Diffusing some of the images and dialogue within the play might be necessary when topics are too complicated for the child to be able to understand. The chaperone may field questions that the child may have about the topics explored in the production but must also gauge how much to tell the child and know when it is best to defer to and inform the parents of their child's curiosity.

### ***D. Rehearsal Process***

Including the child with the cast in the discussion of the script and relevant themes is beneficial if the child is of an appropriate age. Making a child actor feel as if they are part of the creative process will allow for a fuller experience for the child as well as opening up rehearsal as a time when it is appropriate to ask questions of the play and its characters.

There needs to be some level of sophistication in the reasoning capability of the youth actor that allows them to understand, challenge, accept, and/or put the challenging aspects of the script into perspective with their own world view. That sounds grandiose—but I think we often don't give youth enough credit for their ability to have fairly sophisticated world-views (Willis).

A director may choose not to involve children in the discussion and table work involved in dissecting a production, but in fact this is the perfect time to introduce children of an appropriate age into an adult discussion about the complications of representing certain situations and characters on stage.

If possible and appropriate, before the show opens, the child should be given the opportunity to watch the entirety of the show (including those scenes they do not act in) as was the case in the University of Oregon's *The Trojan Women*. The parent I interviewed comments of her experience,

I think it is very important for children to see the full picture and through conversations understand the harder parts of what is portrayed—especially as the cast goes through the process of creation—it makes the child part of the group in a different way

and it also allows the child a chance to understand and to begin to create (Anonymous parent).

Seeing the full production will allow the child involved to fully process the story and debrief with their parents.

An exception to recommending the child actors see the entirety of the show might be when play content is not appropriate for the child, such as with the kindergarten and first grade girls in *The Pain and the Itch*. It is most interactive and beneficial to have parents accompany the child actor while watching the show, especially if they are younger, so that there is an adult to respond to any questions however they deem the most appropriate. As allowing the child to see the rest of the production when the child is not on stage might not be possible due to age of the child and some of the images and dialogues present, another option is to set up an informal dialogue with the child about the play as a whole. Ideally the director and the parents of the child might check in with the child, questioning what the child interprets certain moments of the play to mean. A plot summary as well as a possible moral message would be ideal to communicate to the child at this point, allowing for questions and discussion. Should the child not have an accurate understanding of a particular moment, it is then at the discretion of the parent to determine whether or not to enlighten their child about the actual meaning. Michelle Dolan, the mother of a girl in *The Pain and the Itch*,

chose to leave several topics misunderstood by her daughter as a means to protect her.

### ***E. Community Communication During Production***

During the show, in order to open up a dialogue with the community, added materials included in the program aid audience members in understanding the choice to include children and the precautions taken throughout. Also favorable to include along with the production is an optional audience talk-back immediately following at least some of the performances. A talk-back allows both the theatre company to more fully address the process, but also includes community members in the discussion by allowing them to ask questions of the company or share their feedback.

### ***F. Exit Interview and Evaluation***

Lastly, after the play opens and especially once it closes, an “exit interview” should be established for the child actor; parents might be included if the child is of a younger age and the director deems it more appropriate. This interview clears up any lingering questions or confusions in the child’s mind. As there is a possibility for questions and issues to come up even during the run of the show, it is still important to check in with the child continuously to make sure that they remain comfortable with the process and the material. The nature of theatre involves repeated performances, so talking with a child about their



experience is a continuous and developing process. This interview will also allow the theatre company to determine which methods implemented were the most effective and useful when involving the child and which might need to be honed for the next production. Using each production and experience as an aid for growth and improvement will be eternally valuable and help the company to maintain and tweak these guidelines so that they can be the most effective. This final discussion could include questions to the child or to the parent about their child such as:

1. What was your favorite part of being involved with this process?
2. What did you learn from participating in this play?
3. Was there ever a time that you felt uncomfortable? What would have made you feel more comfortable?

These questions are valuable to ask along with any others that might be beneficial to the future inclusion of children. In this way, the theatre company can evaluate their level of success and continually strive to improve.

### **Considerations**

I believe when a theatre company chooses a similar play to the case studies discussed that these guidelines are an effective model for appropriate inclusion of the child. Every show and circumstance is

different. I have attempted to make these guidelines open so that they might be consulted in most any situation. There are several facts that must always be taken into consideration: the age of the child and how advanced they seem to be as well as their maturity level can affect how they respond to and engage with the material; the subject matter presented in the play itself; and how the director is choosing to have the subject matter portrayed on stage. For instance, if a scene is based strongly in reality it might be more damaging for a young child to witness than the representation of a difficult subject. There is a degree of violence from which the child (and the audience) is already being sheltered if the scene leans towards the more representational or symbolic.

### **What Now?**

In March of 2009, I attended the first Jonathan Levy Child Drama Symposium held on campus at Arizona State University Herberger College School of Theatre and Film. The conference concerned ethics and the representation of childhood in performance, pedagogy and popular culture. At this conference, several academics and current practitioners discussed the implications of including children in the arts. The central question of the conference was, "Given that adults create, control, and distribute the vast majority of childhood representations, what are the ethical parameters of adult relationships with and responsibilities to

children?” (Arizona State University). As a group of professionals experienced either in working with children in psychology or sociological study or as practitioners of theatre, we discussed our definitions for morality and ethics. We then applied these definitions to our discussion of how best to include children in the arts without abusing the subsisting adult power that is held.

Encouraging artists and scholars to come together to discuss the representation of children in the arts, and in theatre in particular, is beneficial to the field. Symposia such as the Jonathan Levy Child Drama Symposium will aid future theatre-makers to enter into the discussion of what ethical parameters exist. I encourage the invitation of more than just those in the field to incorporate multiple perspectives and broaden the experience and opinions of the group. A continuation of the discussion surrounding the ethics of the involvement of children in the theatre is vital. I hope that this paper will continue to fuel future discussions and start the process towards a more communal proposition for how best to include children on stage in adult plays.

There are cases when a child is required by a script but should not be exposed to what is occurring on stage when they are not present and even sometimes when they are present on stage. Creative solutions to describe to the child the actions they must perform sometimes take the place of what the director wants the audience to perceive. For example,

asking a child to go and hug their friend “Steve” is not as abrasive as asking them to allow the audience to think that they are being molested by Steve’s character.

Adrienne Scullion points out in her article about war stories for children that children’s literature often deals with some highly taxing moral and political issues. She states, however, “when it comes to theatre for children the alternative production processes and the immediacy of the live performance present particular challenges and opportunities for telling stories of war and violent conflict to children” (318). Among the opportunities that present themselves, Scullion suggests that dramaturgy can be used in theatres as an educational tool to respond to questions that a child might be having about adult subject matter. If applied to child actors in adult plays, dramaturgical background, given in the form of a discussion, an oral or written story, or an accessible movie could help to cull apprehensions from everyone involved about putting a child into a performance with content that seems over their heads.

There are many positive effects to involving a child actor in an adult play. Isabel Burger states that the theatre-maker must aim for theatre to act as a rehearsal for living. She asks,

Does the youth leader aim too high when he approaches the drama project as a rehearsal for living? Can any child be so rehearsed for his life role that he will respond adequately to every situation

encountered on the world's stage? The obvious answer to the latter question is a negative one; the aspiring leader will, however, also make a negative reply to the former (144).

Burger alludes to the fact that any leaders or administrators of youth should have such an attitude toward the theatre and its effect on the children participating in it. Rather than assuming that children will absorb moral values, an instinctive consciousness of morality needs to be developed. As I have stated in Chapter Two, experience and imitation is an important part of child development and learning. Engaging the child in a theatre performance provides the perfect opportunity to educate the child towards a moral consciousness, because the theatrical event is a forum for discovery and interaction, especially with difficult ideas.

Children, through acting in adult plays, are exposed to themes with which they can possibly cast a net of ideas and questions to explore these difficult topics. This earlier exposure, when in a safe environment, has the potential to provide an appropriate introduction to the discussion of violence among humans and other such topics. On the other hand, the use of children on stage casts valuable questions onto the audience that might cause some self-reflection on current issues and the society in which we are living today. This effect would not be the same if it were instead adult actors portraying child roles onstage. Adult actors acting the roles of children might "ameliorate the shock of seeing children behave this way" (Istel 117). To deny the audience the shock and disgust

at seeing an actual child portraying adult themes on stage excuses the audience from facing these issues head on.

The theatre presents a unique opportunity to involve children in a dialogue to prepare them for the particular issues at hand, helping them build tools to deal with other challenges as they develop. Theatre can help to address some of these more adult issues within a safe sphere. Establishing a consistent set of ethics surrounding what to consider when including a child in any artistic production with adult themes will ensure the most beneficial theatre experience for all involved.

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